

# Bedfordshire Water Vole Monitoring

2005

by

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## **1. Introduction**

The following monitoring was undertaken at the request of the Bedfordshire Wildlife Trust as part of the Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project. The monitoring was undertaken by Mick McCarrick, the Bedfordshire Mammal recorder and John Green, the Riddy Water vole recorders, Gill Holt and Katrina Bourne and the Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project Officer, Amanda Proud. The results have also been submitted to the Biodiversity Recording Monitoring centre, the Environment Agency and the Bedford Group of Drainage Boards.

## **2. Method**

Data on previous surveys was collated from the Wildlife Trust, Bedfordshire Mammal recorder and the Ivel and Ouse Countryside Project and a list of sites to be surveyed compiled.

The sites were walked looking for signs : a sighting, latrines and droppings, feeding signs and holes in the bank. In order to gain some index of quantitative data the ease with which signs were found was also recorded. In some locations latrines were counted. Where there was difficulty accessing the water's edge or it would cause too much disturbance the bank was walked and the water's edge accessed every 20-30 metres as was appropriate, to look for signs.

## **3. Results**

The results of the monitoring are shown in table 1, where they are divided into catchments, and on maps 1-7. A separate table of results is shown in appendix 1 in the format suitable for the data base for the Biodiversity Recording Monitoring Centre.

Map references, latrine counts and ease of finding the populations are given in the results table and are not repeated here. The scale of 1:25000 for the maps has been chosen as it shows the extent of the populations but it does not allow accurate mapping of the populations which must be taken from the map references.

### **3.1 Ivel Catchment Populations**

The Ivel population which was initially located on the Riddy stream in the Riddy Nature Reserve in Sandy in 2000, is now using the Riddy stream from its confluence with the River Ivel to south of New Road Bridge, Sandy at TL 1761 4799. There is also a an easily found population on the ditch running parallel to the east of New Road Bridge, then following the Sandy Quarry road.

Water voles are present on the Ivel river itself intermittently from New Road Bridge to South Mills and continuously from New Road Bridge south to the Sandy Quarry.

They were also recorded in ditches on both the east and west of the Ivel around Hamlet End and Willow Farm.

There does not appear to be any sign of the numbers increasing since the 2003 Ivel survey in the northern section of the Ivel from South Mills to its confluence with the River Great Ouse with the exception of the population on Blunham Brook.

The Blunham Brook population was first located in 2003 and suffered from heavy trampling from cattle. A grant from English Nature and the permission of the landowner enabled the Ivel and Ouse Countryside Project to fence the upper section of the Brook. Only a few feeding signs were located during a spot check in 2004 but there was evidence water voles along almost the whole fenced stretch in 2005.

This year for the first time water voles were recorded on the Biggleswade Common stream that runs parallel with the old railway line. They have been there in the past (G Lawrence, pers com.)

Also this year for the first time a latrine was found at Taylor's Mill in the upper reaches of the Ivel. Again there is evidence of them being present there in the past.

### **3.2 The Potton Brook Population**

The Potton Brook population continues to exist on Potton Brook along the Henry Smith playing fields and intermittently south as far as Sutton Splash. The population in the section passing through the John O'Gaunt golf course continues despite the short grass on the banks. The population to the north continues on Potton Brook past the sewage works. This section of the population is not thought to be as numerous as in 2003 when over 30 latrines were located along a 900 metre stretch. This survey recorded only 17 latrines over the same stretch. The Gamlingay population on Millbridge Brook, which is in Cambridgeshire, but just north of the Potton Brook population, is still present.

### **3.3 The River Rhee Population**

The water vole is still present on the River Rhee both north and south of Whitegates Bridge. It is also still present on the stream from the Wrestlingworth Sewage Works, which ultimately flows into the Rhee. There were no signs of water vole in the Eyeworth ditch, which was last recorded positive in 2002.

### **3.4 The North Bedfordshire Populations River Great Ouse Catchment**

No evidence was found of water vole population on Colmworth Brook or at Wilden.

A population was photographed by Barry Mason on the brook running through Strawberry Hill Farm at Knocking Green in 2004. This stream was dry in 2005. This population has been in this stream ever since the farm manager, now in his seventies, can remember. The farm manager did record water vole in 2005 on the pond near the farm buildings. The stream was regularly trapped for mink but the farm manager has been unable to continue trapping over the last few years.

The Reynolds Brook population was recorded present in 2003. Droppings were found at only one site during this survey but further evidence has since been found by the IDB.

### **3.5 The Luton and River Lea Population**

The population at Leagrave Marsh continues to be good with populations along the Houghton Brook and Lewsey Brook and the section of the River Lea where these two tributaries join. A live sighting of a water vole was made on the Lewsey Brook and the whole length of the three sections was walked with spot checks being made

where access was best. A total of 13 latrines were found as well as burrows and chewed vegetation.

The River Lea continues its course through Limbury, into Fallowfield and then Under the A6 towards Kingsdown Avenue and Stockingstone Road. The populations of water voles through Limbury, do not appear to be large and some areas are difficult to check from the bank but latrines were found at Neville Road and Runfold Avenue. A small section over fifty metres at Bancroft Road did however produce 6 latrines and lots of chewed vegetation as well as holes along the bank.

Water voles are still present on the Lea between Kingsdown Avenue and Stockingstone Road despite dredging along this section in 2004 and damage to some sections of the banking. Only four latrines with chewed vegetation were seen along this stretch of the river but three animals were seen on the day of the check.

Cowslip Meadow continues to retain a population of water voles despite the small stream which runs into the Lea drying out on occasion in recent hot summers. Latrines were found on the section running from the small concrete culvert into the meadow and the wooden footbridge.

Fallowfield was the only disappointment for the Luton area, having a small population in 2003, no latrines or chewed vegetation was found during the 2005 survey. Holes were still present but these have been known to last a number of years.

#### **4. Discussion**

The water vole in the Ivel catchment continues to expand its range along the main river and along associated ditches. The rise and fall of mink numbers in East Anglia is well documented by Jefferies, 2003. Otter spraint is regularly found along the Ivel (Ivel Otter Monitors). Although the otter and mink are not mutually exclusive the presence of otters on a watercourse does result in a decline in the mink population (Jefferies, 2003). It is to be hoped that the water vole population will continue to increase as mink numbers decrease and otters continue to use the river.

The Potton population was not as numerous in its northern section as in 2003, (A. Proud, 2003). It is possible that a mink may have used the watercourse as the population does not appear to have expanded or increased in numbers as the Ivel population.

The Rhee population will always be in danger of extinction as the Rhee flows into the Cam where mink are present. There has been no sign of a return of the water vole to the Cam.

The north Bedfordshire population is still declining with the loss of populations in the last few years. It is not known if this is due to the presence of mink. Further survey work in north Beds would help to understand what is happening with these populations. Are there still water voles up or down stream of the Strawberry Hill Farm brook? Are there any populations elsewhere on Reynold's Brook or in surrounding ditches? Are any water voles surviving near Yelden or Riseley?

The Luton and River Lea populations continue to stay relatively stable with the exception of Fallowfield. The reasons for the decline here are not known but only existed on a small section of the Lea at this point.

Cowslip Meadow remains a concern with the water flow being erratic during dry spells and the density of reed mace into the main channel which could lead to it silting up.

The Bedfordshire Otters and Rivers Project is in the process of employing mink rafts at the following locations: Riddy stream, Sandy Quarry, Biggleswade Common, Blunham Brook, Potton Brook and Langford Common. The aim for the first five sites is to protect the water vole populations, which are now thriving at these locations. Mink are still common in the Langford area and it is hoped that the raft on a watercourse at Langford Common will record if mink are using the area and then assist in reducing the mink population.

With the exception of the record at Taylor's Bridge water vole are not thought to have returned to the Ivel south of Biggleswade or the Hiz which until recently held a good population.

The continuation of survey work in 2006 is needed to establish if the Ivel population is continuing to spread and depending on the success of the mink rafts and if the man/women/ volunteer power exists to expand their use. Where mink rafts have been used extensively the water vole numbers have rapidly increased within a few years (Game Conservancy Trust).